

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T NEW DELHI 11293

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MNUC, TECH, IN
SUBJECT: REPORT OF SETHNA TRANSFER

REF: (A) TEHRAN 6683; (B) STATE 180798

SUMMARY. WE HAVE NO INFORMATION TO SUBSTANTIATE THE MENTION IN REF A THAT SETHNA IS BEING TRANSFERRED TO NEW DELHI AND CONSIDER THE REPORT A PROBABLE MISUNDERSTANDING ON ETE-MAD'S PART. CONSUL GENERAL COURTNEY IN BOMBAY REPORTS THAT GIVEN THE PROBLEMS SETHNA IS ENCOUNTERING IN ADMINISTERING THE NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND THE CRITICISM HE RECEIVES FROM ALL SIDES--MINISTER, POLITICIANS, BUREAUCRATS AND SCIENTISITS--THERE IS FERTILE GROUND FOR ALL SORTS OF RUMORS ABOUT THE AEC'S PROGRAMS AND PERSONNEL. HOWEVER, SETHNA DOES NOT GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT HE IS PREPARING TO LEAVE BOMBAY BUT RATHER HE SEEMS TO BE TRIMMING HIS SAILS, AS HE HAS DONE IN THE PAST WHEN UNDER ATTACK, WHILE HOPING FOR BETTER WEATHER AHEAD. FOLLOWING IS FULL TEXT OF COURTNEY'S MESSAGE (BOMBAY 1825) IN RESPONSE TO REF B. END SUMMARY.

1. BEGIN TEXT: OBVIOUSLY, SETHNA IS NO LONGER THE UNCHALLENGED LEADER OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR ESTABLISHMENT. HE IS BUFS-
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FETED BY MINISTERS FROM ABOVE, POLITICIANS AND BUREAUCRATS FROM ALL SIDES; AND SCIENTISTS AND ADMINISTRATORS IN HIS OWN DEPARTMENT. IN PART, THIS WEAKNESS STEMS FROM SET BACKS IN HIS PROGRAM, E.G., DELAYS IN COMPLETING RAPP II AND THE HEAVY WATER PLANTS, PROBLEMS WITH SUPPLY FOR TARAPUR AND SNAIL'S PACE PROGRESS WITH THE FAST BREEDER, WHICH IS THE CENTERPIECE FOR THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR POWER PROGRAM. EQUALLY

IMPORTANT, THE MOMENTUM OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMS HAS BEEN LOST; THERE HAVE BEEN NO MAJOR INITIATIVES SINCE THE POKHARAN EXPLOSION OF 1974.

2. THE SUDDEN TRANSFER OF RAJA RAMANNA OUT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ATOMIC ENERGY AND THE DELAY IN NAMING A REPLACEMENT HAVE HAD THE EFFECT OF MAKING SETHNA VERY DEFENSIVE IN DISCUSSING OPERATIONS OF HIS DEPARTMENT. PROBABLY BECAUSE HE IS LESS CERTAIN THAT HIS OWN VIEWS WILL PREVAIL IN INDIAN GOVERNMENT COUNCILS HE HAS BECOME HESITANT TO EXPOSE THE DIRECTION OF HIS OWN THINKING ON MAJOR ISSUES. THIS CONTRASTS MARKEDLY WITH SITUATION TWO YEARS AGO WHEN HE COULD DEVELOP A POSITION ON AN ISSUE LIKE BUY-BACK AND SELL IT IN HIS OWN GOVERNMENT, OVER SIGNIFICANT OPPOSITION IN HIS OWN DEPARTMENT AND IN MEA.

3. THESE CONDITIONS PROVIDE FERTILE GROUND FOR ALL SORTS OF RUMORS ABOUT PROGRAMS AND PEOPLE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ATOMIC ENERGY. UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES IT WOULD BE UNWISE FOR ME TO INQUIRE DIRECTLY ABOUT RUMORS THAT HE MIGHT BE LEAVING HIS PRESENT POSITION. HOWEVER, ONE DOES NOT GET THE IMPRESSION THAT HE IS PREPARING TO LEAVE, RATHER, IT WOULD SEEM THAT HE IS TRIMMING HIS SAILS TO RIDE OUT A STORM, WHILE HOPING FOR BETTER WEATHER AHEAD. HE ADOPTED A SIMILAR ATTITUDE TWO YEARS AGO WHEN P.N. DHAR TOOK THE LEAD IN AN ATTEMPT TO RESUME CO-OPERATION WITH CANADA. BOMBAY SCIENTIFIC GROUP DID NOT LIKE CANADIAN TERMS AND SETHNA'S WITHDRAWN POSTURE ALLOWED HIM TO
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RIDE OUT THAT STORM.

4. THERE ARE MANY INDICATIONS THAT HIS SCIENTISTS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE STRONGLY PRESSURING HIM TO URGE TOUGHER RESISTANCE AT THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL TO WHAT THEY REGARD AS UNACCEPTABLE PRESSURE FROM SUPER POWERS TO PUT INDIA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMS UNDER INTERNATIONAL CONTROL. THESE PEOPLE BELIEVE SETHNA HAS BEEN OVER-ACCOMMODATING TO U.S. AND TOO READY TO BEND TO RUSSIAN DEMANDS. J.C. SHAH'S HANDLING OF THE TARAPUR RERACKING PROJECT HAS ALMOST CERTAINLY BEEN DESIGNED TO DEMONSTRATE THAT HE IS TOUGHER THAN SETHNA IN STANDING UP TO U.S. ON OTHER HAND WHEN SETHNA TRIES TO ASSUAGE THE HAWKS IN HIS OWN ESTABLISHMENT HE RUNS INTO DIFFICULTY WITH PM'S OFFICE WHICH SEEMS TO WANT HIM TO FIND RESPONSES WHICH AT LEAST SEEM TO BE MORE RESPONSIVE TO WORLD-WIDE CONCERN OVER DANGEROUS NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION AND INADEQUATE CONTROLS ON PLUTONIUM AND ENRICHMENT.

5. COMMENT: THESE ARE DIFFICULT DAYS FOR SETHNA, AND IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THERE ARE RECURRENT RUMORS ABOUT HIS DEPARTURE. HOWEVER, I BELIEVE HE INTENDS TO FIGHT HARD TO STAY IN PLACE, HOPING THAT HIS BASIC PROGRAMS SUCH AS HEAVY WATER,

THE NATURAL URANIUM REACTORS AND BREEDER REACTORS REGAIN THEIR
MOMENTUM, THEREBY RESTORING THE AURA OF SUCCESS THAT HE NEEDS
TO REESTABLISH THE PREEMINENCE HE LONG ENJOYED IN INDIA'S
NUCLEAR AFFAIRS. COURTNEY END TEXT.
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